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THE GOLDEN AGE OF BAY AREA PAINTING

By Michael Leonard

Art historians and art critics have called the period between 1945 and 1950 The Golden Age of Bay Area Painting. The artistic innovations wrought in that relatively short time span of five years, particularly those made at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), radically changed the course of painting on the West Coast of the United States. This artistic revolution, which closely paralleled that taking place with more far-reaching effects in New York City, reflected in part the nation's growing awareness of having emerged from the ashes of World War II as the world's premiere social, economic and political power. A great surge of energy and idealism cloaked in the habit of heroic individualism accompanied this new consciousness, finding

fresh expression in the nation's artwork and taking the form of a revolutionary painting style commonly known today as Abstract Expressionism.

True to the spirit of post-war America, San Francisco, traditional center for art on the West Coast but a distant cultural satellite of Eastern metropolises like New York City, attempted to throw off its provincial mantle and conservative tastes in art. Prior to the conclusion of World War II, Bay Area painting adhered to lessons gleaned from European Cubist and American Social Realist painters of the 1920s and 1930s. The California School of Fine Arts and the San Francisco Museum of Art (now the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) served as hub for the West's most advanced ideas about art. Few galleries existed at the time and San Francisco department stores like Gumps and the City of Paris and the San Francisco Art Association provided most exhibition opportunities for talented regional artists.

Several factors hastened the birth of the Bay Area's Golden Age of Painting: an influx of ex-

*Richard Diebenkorn
Ocean Park Series #49, 1972
oil on canvas, 93 x 81 inches
Los Angeles County Museum of Art*



Elmer Bischoff

The Singing Lesson, 1952 o/c, 57 x 69 inches

Natsoulas Novelozo Gallery

GIs as students at the California School of Fine Arts; the appointment of Douglas MacAgy to the directorship of the school; the hiring of Clyfford Still as a faculty member at the CSFA; and the innovative stewardships of three local museum administrators—Dr. Grace McCann Morely, Jermaine MacAgy and Ninfa Valvo.

With the implementation of the GI Bill of Rights, veterans of WW II returned to American schools in record numbers. The California School of Fine Arts, oldest school of fine arts west of the Mississippi (1873) and fifth oldest school of its kind in the nation, naturally attracted many of the ex-GIs interested in furthering their art education. Veterans like James Budd Dixon, Ed Corbett, Frank Lobdell, Jack Jefferson, Elmer Bischoff, Peter Shoemaker, John Grillo and Jim Kelly came from various parts of the United States, drawn to the Bay Area by its natural

beauty, mild climate and low living costs. Among the talented younger students matriculating at the CSFA were Richard Diebenkorn, Deborah Remington, David Simpson, Hayward King, Wally Hedrick and James Weeks.

The presence of vets at the CSFA created a unique atmosphere of great intensity and ferment. Bischoff recalls that the barriers of age and experience normally separating students from teachers seemed to disappear when the ex-GIs arrived. A wonderful comradeship prevailed. Everyone painted, argued, discussed and drank together as equals. Lobdell believes this climate of discussion and debate—the exploration of and tolerance for diverse view points—accounted for the school's primary strength.

No degrees were offered as yet—only certificates signifying the completion of a specific course of studies. Walter Kuhlman, student dur-

ing the Golden Age and recently retired as Professor of Art at Sonoma State College, remarked of that period:

"Actually, in those days the school was so free, you know, that you'd come in the mornings, paint until two o'clock, then go down to Bruno's and drink wine. It was tremendous. It was not like the organized art schools today where everybody is degree nutty. They're looking for a meal ticket which they won't get anyway."

An air of immediacy was everywhere. Action counted, not words. Process took precedence over product. The spontaneous expression of feelings weighed heavier than the careful deliberation of the intellect. "I had never seen that kind of painting before," observed navy veteran Jefferson. "Most of the artists I'd known had a sort of workman-like attitude. It was a fervor and an impatience with existing conditions in the art world, with existing painting."

Jazz, that most spontaneous, unsophisticated and indigenous of musical forms was enormously popular with students and teachers alike, fitting their artistic temperaments perfectly. "The way I painted was completely intuitive, completely on the pulse. Like jazz really....," said Raymond Parker, another student.

Of this often blind search for truth, Bill Morehouse tells the following story about Marcel Duchamp's visit to the California School of Fine Arts in 1949. While touring the premises, Duchamp entered a studio occupied by Morehouse who was working on a non-objective painting. "What are you doing, young man?" inquired Duchamp. "I don't know," replied Morehouse. "Fine," exclaimed Duchamp. "Keep up the good work!"

While rejecting the banal materialism that infected America after the war, the artists generally maintained an attitude of careless disregard for the materials they employed (usually the cheapest and most readily available). Diebenkorn and Weeks, to name a few, are known to have used commercial house paints or a cheap, synthetic enamel called Duco. Consequently, many of their paintings seen today show signs of premature deterioration.

A new competitive spirit—one blatantly and overtly expressed rather than politely and covertly understood prevailed at the CSFA. A "macho" bunch, students vied with one another to see who could produce, not necessarily the best, but the most shocking and outrageous paintings. Lobdell thought this competition benefi-

cial to the artists—encouraging them to explore and innovate in their work. He found it fun, as well-like a game, where students tried to "wow" one another or "knock someone on their ass." Ernest Briggs said: "At the same time we were at the school, I remember they used to have competitions to see who could make the nastiest painting, get the greasiest black,"; while another former student, John Sacarro, recalled a popular school slogan at the time: "If you can't paint a good one, paint a big one." In a more serious vein, the new spirit of competition was aimed for the first time at "making it" commercially in the art world. "After all, it was Pollock and Rothko and Still who killed off the Surrealists in this town, upstaged them," said Briggs. "It took me years to understand that. That's what the war is all about in the art world. How to unseat the reigning king."

Beneath their outward display of bravado, feelings of post-war disillusionment and in incumbent existential angst simmered and found a voice in their paintings. No clearer expression of disgust, disillusion and longing for a tabula rasa exists on record than the words of Clyfford Still, artist and teacher at the school, whose great influence upon the painting produced there lasted years after his departure in 1950. Speaking of his artistic heritage, Still said: "I don't believe in historicity. I don't believe in museums. I don't believe in the Renaissance. The Renaissance has had us hog-tied for two hundred years." In the same spirit but referring to the contemporary painting, he remarked:

"To me it became imperative that if this instrument—this extension of one's mind and heart and hand—was to be given its potential, a fresh start must be made. My conclusion was born of knowledge of the past, but my understanding of the past and its influence, right up to the present moment, made it clear that it could not be escaped by will alone. The manifestos and gestures of the Cubists, the Fauves, the Dadaists, Surrealists, Futurists or Expressionists were only evidence that the Black Mass was but a pathetic homage to that which it often presumed to mock and the Bauhaus herded them briskly into a cool, universal Buchenwald. All the devices were at hand, and all the devices had failed to emancipate."

Peter Shoemaker offered this similar though less poetical student's view:

"I think it was an historical situation of breaking away from Cubism and Realism and Expressionism. I think after the war there was a sort of sense of a fresh start in many areas of life. There was a feeling of 'Let's start

a new slate!" In a lot of ways, and this may have been part of it also, so that you sort of clear the board of the historical continuity and embark on a personal search for your own identity and expression."

For most of the ex-GIs, a rejection of the past was more an emotional response than an intellectual one. Few were schooled in the facts of art history.

Even the conservative Board of Trustees of the California School of Fine Arts found it impossible to resist the infectious desire for change sweeping across the nation in 1945. Although they made a few concessions towards reform before the end of the war, the trustees went overboard at its conclusion, hiring Douglas MacAgy to the school's new director.

MacAgy was a perfect choice for the times. Born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1913, he headed the Department of Education at the Cleveland Museum of Art before joining Dr. Grace McCann Morely, Director of the San Francisco Museum of Art, as her assistant in 1941. Intelligent, ambitious, outspoken, eager to learn, he moved easily and comfortably at all levels of society. MacAgy dreamed of converting the California School of Fine Arts from a sleepy, provincial art school of some historical significance into a major national, even international, center for the fine arts. Lured away from the museum by the school's board of trustees with the promise of a virtual blank check to do as he pleased, he embarked upon a policy of transformation immediately.

MacAgy had the school's Diego Rivera mural covered over with a false ceiling as a first official act and herald of a new era. While maintaining a healthy respect for the past, he directed the bulk of his energies toward the latest artistic current and encouraged others at the school to do the same. He made frequent visits to local art studios in search of new talent and cultivated a great interest in Surrealism, which he transferred to its offspring, Abstract Expressionism. The vivacity, spontaneity and raw energy of Abstract Expressionist painting were characteristics amazingly congruent with MacAgy's own personality.

Though he took pride in the school's already strong commercial art program and was instrumental in helping Ansel Adams set-up the school's pioneer photography program in 1946, MacAgy focused his attentions on the painting

department. Very much the romantic and would-be artist, he felt a natural kinship with the painters and adopted them for his own.

As director, he more than doubled the size of the department's staff, hiring talented artists and teachers like Hassel Smith, Clay Spohn, David Park, Bischoff, Still, Diebenkorn, Ed Corbett, Jean Varda and Mark Rothko (two summers). Consequently, the painting department became the center of the school's energy and creativity and source of some of the most stunning artistic achievements of the West Coast.

A number of different stories circulated as to how MacAgy came to hire Clyfford Still in 1946. Most popular, the mythic version, tells of a tall, intense looking stranger with a shock of white hair dressed in a long, black overcoat suddenly and mysteriously appearing at the door to MacAgy's office asking for a job. MacAgy is to have been so impressed with the force of the stranger's personality, that he appointed him (Still) to a position on the spot without further ado.

It is no surprise that a mythology of some kind should evolve around the person of Still, so strong and unique was his character and so powerful the influence of his painting upon those who worked with him. Actual facts indicate that MacAgy knew of Still and his work well before he hired him on that fateful day. Still, who came to the Bay Area from the state of Washington in 1941, was selected for a retrospective exhibition two years later at the San Francisco Museum of Art which included works dating back to 1929. MacAgy, the museum's Assistant Director at the time, must have known Still's paintings, if not the artist himself.

Before assuming his duties as an instructor at the California School of Fine Arts, Still spent a year in New York, connecting with the revolutionary Cedar Bar clique of Abstract Expressionist artists. The prestigious Janis Gallery chose to represent his work and Peggy Guggenheim gave him a one-man exhibition at her avant garde Art of This Century Gallery (1946). When he returned to San Francisco, Still brought with him some of New York's most advanced ideas about art vis-a-vis his own canvases. These had an even greater impact upon the minds of regional painters than the appearance of New York's Mark Rothko at the CSFA during the summers of 1947 and 1949. Convinced by both MacAgy and Still to visit San Francisco, Rothko's

own painting underwent a major transition during those brief encounters, particularly because of his contact with Still.

One of Still's twelve, hand-picked "disciples" (as his most dedicated young followers were called) described the effect of Still's paintings on almost everyone who saw them for the first time:

"I remember the annual as loaded with room after room of Surrealist sort of decorative take-offs, a lot of so-called Klee-type things and very sweet French surfaces going on and what not and then this Still painting and it was absolutely a contradiction to all the rest of the stuff, I mean, if you accepted it, you had to reject the other and if you accepted the other stuff, you had to reject it. It was an absolute yes or no situation. It had a very repelling effect at the time and yet somehow you felt the vitality and the fresh air."

Another of the "disciples," Jefferson, remembers the maestro occasionally inviting him downstairs to his broom closet-of-a-studio at the base of the school's bell tower, offering him a shot of whiskey, and showing him his latest work. "I can't say that I liked them," said Jefferson. "It was like a blast...You couldn't ignore the raw vitality in his work...His sureness, self-confidence was awesome."

Still's uncompromising nature brought him into continual conflict with art establishments. When he became upset with Janis, the "Mount Olympus of art galleries" at the time, for what he perceived to be their poor judgement in the handling of his work, Still had the "chutzpah" to drop them. One student remarked: "Of course, the dealers hated him, the critics hated him, the museums hated him and at the same time, they wanted him. They wanted him like mad and they hated him like mad." Suspicious of commercial dealers but impatient for public recognition, Still and his disciples opened their own cooperative gallery, the Metart (April 1949 to July 1950). Situated in what had been a vacant storefront at 527 Bush Street, the Metart briefly served as a unique outpost for avant garde painting.

There is an untitled Still canvas dated 1934 in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection. It shows a lone, nude male figure striding forcefully across a bleak landscape. This painting must be, even if unintentionally so, one of Still's most personally revealing. The artist's isolation and strong self-determination in the face of a hostile envi-



Clifford Still
oil on canvas

Untitled, 1945
70 7/8 x 42 inches

ronment are vividly portrayed in this fascinating piece. The loose, expressive brush strokes, the energetic and scruffy modelling of the painted surface with palette knife are portents of that lonely, inward journey he embarked upon.

In many ways, Still was the West Coast's answer to Jackson Pollock. Looking at this early painting, one is reminded of a Pollock self-portrait (completed at the age of sixteen) with its similar dark moodiness; the same feelings of the subject as an alienated being; and the equally nervous, energetic manner in which it is rendered. The parallels between their artistic development and temperaments are striking. Each epitomized an artist's version of the heroic, nineteenth century western frontiersman, going it alone while breaking new ground. Each pushed his inner vision to the brink of chaotic



Hassel Smith
oil on canvas

Figure with Flowers, 1947
28 x 14 inches

self-indulgence without falling into that chasm to which so many of their imitators fell victim. On canvas, they forsook objective reality to convey their purest abstract visions. The manipulation of paint itself became the most significant aspect of their search, the physicality of paint and canvas their last frontier. Each attempted to achieve spiritual liberation by means of a methodical, paradoxical application of raw, almost brute force on canvas.

Fortunately for regional artists, three unusually courageous, forward-looking administrators served at San Francisco's fine arts museums during this tumultuous time when public opinion weighed heavily against abstract art. The institutional support they provided for the young artists through the Golden Age, was unusual in its time and a far cry from conditions today, where museums are either reluctant or economically unable to offer consistent help to emerging local talent. Dr. Grace McCann Morely, Director of the San Francisco Museum of Art, Jermayne MacAgy, Director of the Palace

of the Legion of Honor and Ninfa Valvo, Curator at the M.H. de Young Museum provided many budding young painters like Diebenkorn, Lobdell and Jefferson with their first one-man exhibitions. Since 1935 when Dr. Morely became director, the San Francisco Museum of Art hosted the West's largest and most comprehensive display of new work by local artists—the San Francisco Art Association Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture.

Abstract Expressionism was neither invented in a vacuum nor pulled from a magician's hat. Its roots lay in the work of the Mexican muralists and more importantly, the European Surrealist artists. The Mexicans taught Americans to think "big" (scale), while the Europeans encouraged them to look inwards for abstract forms derived from their own psyches.

Diego Rivera's 1931 visit to San Francisco allowed regional artists a first hand look at mural painting (Rivera completed three murals, all extant today). Six years later, the San Francisco Museum of Art hosted an important exhibition curated by Alfred Barr, Jr. one of New York's Museum of Modern Art titled "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism," providing them with their first serious glimpse at surrealist creations. Included in this impressive collection spanning five centuries of fantastic art were works by modern masters associated with the Surrealist Movement like Salvador Dali, Giorgio di Chirico, Max Ernst, Rene Magritte, Alberto Giacometti and Marcel Duchamp. Thereafter, from 1940 until the dawn of the Golden Age, Dr. Morely of the San Francisco Museum of Art "presented...at least one exhibition each year focused on the work of an exiled member of the Surrealist group or an artist working in an abstract/surrealist mode." When the war ended, the museum focused its attention on New York's pioneer abstract expressionist painters, exhibiting work by Pollock (1945) and Rothko (1946) and purchasing two pieces with strong surrealist overtones for its permanent collection (Pollock's *Guardian of the Secret* and Rothko's *Slow Swirl by the Sea*).

Spohn, Smith and Howard, long term residents of the Bay Area sharing a strong affinity for Surrealism, played significant roles in the evolution of abstract painting here. They were joined by internationally-known, ex-patriot members of the European surrealist group, Stanley William Hayter (1940) and Gordon Onslow-Ford (1947). All, with the exception of On-

slow-Ford, taught at the California School of Fine Arts just prior to or during the Golden Age.

The path adhered to by San Francisco's painters with regard to Surrealism was unique. Artists borrowed the visual vocabulary and automatic technique of Surrealist masters like Dali, Miro and Klee but ignored the intellectual tenets of Surrealism laid out by its leader, Andre Breton, in his manifestos. The accessible beauty of the surrounding Bay Area landscape served many, though not all, of the westerners as a primary emotional catalyst. Fred Martin, currently Dean of Students at the San Francisco Art Institute, observed: "One of the most important elements of Abstract Expressionism in the West was its relationship to Surrealism—not perhaps the Surrealism of Dali but the generic Surrealism of any artist who follows his own intuition."

As the new decade of the 1950s approached, a fissure developed and widened within the avant garde group of Bay Area painters forming two camps: a "purist" group led by Still which brooked no reference whatsoever to recognizable figuration and a clique led by Park which felt a closer allegiance to nature. Referring to a pivotal exhibition of their work at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in 1947, Smith said of this split:

"The experience of seeing those paintings was a definitive one for all of us and created a tremendous sensation and developed in due course a kind of schism in the faculty and student body, dividing those of us who were very keen about and attracted to Clyfford Still's paintings and his ideas about painting and the others, who felt considerable antipathy and opposition to it. So that on the one hand I, Ed Corbett, Frank Lobdell, Ernie Briggs...and others enlisted ourselves in the Clyfford Still ranks, while David Park, Elmer Bischoff and Dick Diebenkorn and others were repelled in some degree by Clyfford's work so quite an argument developed."

In July of 1950, MacAgy resigned as Director of the California School of Fine Arts. Though few people realized it at the time, his resignation signalled the beginning of the end for the Golden Age. A year earlier, enrollment at the CSFA began a rapid decline as funds under the GI Bill dried up. Veterans and ordinary applicants as well found it cheaper to study at public institutions like San Francisco State College.

Keeping the school financially solvent had been the primary concern of its Board of Trustees. When they confronted MacAgy with the practi-



Edward Corbett
oil on canvas

Untitled, 1950
48 x 54 inches

cal considerations of money, he responded by insulting them. MacAgy's own concern as director was to see his personal vision of turning the school into the most prestigious institution of its kind in the West come to fruition—no matter what the costs or other considerations. When money to achieve this goal did not appear to be forthcoming and his relations with the board became strained to the breaking point, MacAgy left what he perceived to be a sinking ship for a new oasis—the cinema.

Still's resignation followed almost immediately on the heels of MacAgy's. Aware of the school's shaky financial condition and deprived of his strongest administrative supporter (MacAgy), Still went out in heroic fashion with a final exhibition at the Metart Gallery. His resignation set in motion a domino-like series of defections by many of the Bay Area's best and most outspoken painters. Lobdell, disgusted by the outbreak of the Korean War so soon after World War II, left the country for Paris, France. Diebenkorn, Spohn and Corbett went to New Mexico, while a large contingent headed for the bright lights of New York City. Bereft of so much talent so quickly, the West could only bow its head in shocked silence as the curtain lowered on the Bay Area's Golden Age of Painting. □